

SHIPBUILDING

(The following article, from The Christian Science Monitor, appeared in the May 8, 1975 Anniversary Issue of the Clipper:)

Duxbury Famed For Shipbuilding

It is not generally known that what is now the peaceful, secluded little town of Duxbury, MA, was one of America's outstanding shipbuilding centers in the early 19th century.

The town's leading shipbuilder and merchant owners were a father and son named Ezra Weston. They commanded a veritable empire of seagoing craft, with brigs, schooners, and even an occasional full-rigged ship, all built on the Bluefish River.

The Westons were dominating personalities, known both here and abroad as King Caesar I and II. It is said that 600 vessels were turned out at the 14 Duxbury shipyards of the Westons over the entire period of their dynasty.

Early Ship

Shipbuilding began in a small way at Duxbury as early as 1700, when a Mr. Prince was recorded as having built a pinnace, or 2-masted vessel, on the western shore of the "Nook" — the Nook or Captain's Nook referring to Capt. Miles Standish, whose property included this shore frontage as well as Captain's Hill, where the monument is located.

The first Ezra Weston, or King Caesar I, already had assumed some degree of prominence in and about Duxbury by 1764 by the building of small sloops and brigs near Harden Hill. His yard was called the "navy yard" by local townspeople.

After the Revolutionary War, Weston decided to expand, and chose for the site of his new yard about 10 acres of land near the mouth of the Bluefish River.

Son Joins Firm

It was ideally situated and well protected from heavy seas by Powder Point at its back and Duxbury Beach to the east, the latter being a long, sandy peninsula that terminates in Gurnet Point off Plymouth some miles to the south.

By the time Ezra II joined his father in the work in 1798, the yards covered what is now the Hermon C. Bumpus Memorial Park, bearing the name of a past president of Tufts College, and most of Powder Point.

In this acreage were a cotton factory for the manufacture of sail cloth, a quarter-mile-long rope walk for the fabrication of lines, tackle, and rigging, and a blacksmith shop. More land was devoted to farms to keep the ever-growing force of workers and their families fed.

When the son took over in 1822 he had inherited all this as well as the double royal soubriquet of King Caesar II. He was preeminent in American shipping. Daniel Webster, a resident of nearby Marshfield, referred to him at the Saratoga political meeting in 1848 in these words: "One of my nearest neighbors is the largest shipowner in the U.S."

Weston was also listed by Lloyds of London, whose specialty was marine insurance. It meant much to the people who worked in his empire, for the country was struggling with a depreciated currency then and Weston delivered his cargoes in Europe and was paid for them in good money.

The King Caesars are said to have dominated the shipping industry of the country for almost a century. They built 97 vessels between 1800 and 1846 and most of them sailed under the Westons' house flag, a horizontally striped red, white, and blue rectangle.

New England's Biggest

Weston launched his greatest effort in 1841. It was the ship Hope, 881 tons. At that time she was New England's largest full-rigged ship. However, some New York packets, particularly those of the Dramatic Line, were a little larger.

The Hope was a conventional craft of the times having rather full or bluff bows and a black hull painted with the white squares of imitation gunports along her sides.

The sail plan called for all plain sail up to and including top gallant sails crossing all 3 sticks, for scarcely a merchantman afloat dared spread a royal, and skysails had not been heard of yet. She was chartered by the Dispatch Line to run between Boston and New Orleans.

Duxbury Clipper, Wednesday, May 29, 1996

Competition Mounts

This was the last vessel of any importance ever built at Duxbury. Already competition was mounting and soon it would sweep small yards out of existence. Merchant shipping pyramided into big business during the 1840's and could no longer be monopolized by a few.

Tonnages for individual ships rose to double and then treble those of the 1830's while the draft of deep-sea vessels reached a mark far in excess of the launching facilities of coastal yards which lacked deep water.

Duxbury was no match for the crack packets which slid out of New York's East River nor the canvas-topper leviathans soon to slide down the ways for James Curtiss of Medford, Briggs of South Boston, and Donald McKay of East Boston.